Limitations in History

Part 1: Problems with Historical Facts

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Abstract

Changing societal conditions form human perceptions of historical facts but the converse is also true – from historical facts, society is built (or destroyed). Since it appears that historical facts exist only in the mind of the beholder, they are perceived and treated in a variety of ways. Like humans, facts are subject to change. Nevertheless, and as a result, huge challenges are faced en responsibility absorbed when dealing with facts in human efforts to 'tell a story of the past' that is most likely to have an influence on the past, about the past, present and future.

1. Introduction

New perspectives acquired (or required) are predominant reasons for 're-search' in, and 're-writing' of, history. Nowadays, many peoples across the world find it increasingly difficult to 'put into practice the principles of humanity in the name of which the sacrifices of war were made'.[1] This relates to changing social conditions and changes in the practical aims that social sciences and environmental humanities (in fact all sciences) pursue. As we live in times of post-truth, it appears as if 'statements about fact'[2] are increasingly at the hands of 'subjective reason'.[3] Historical facts cannot escape this reality.

We define history in the narrow sense 'as the science of the human past.'[4] The aim here is to come to grips with the concept 'fact/s' – specifically '*historical'* facts to reach a

[1] Horkheimer, M. *Eclipse of Reason*, p.(v).
[2] *Ibid*., p.56.
[3] *Ibid.*, p.3.
[4] Aron, R. *Introduction to the Philosophy of History. An Essay on the Limits of Historical Objectivity*, p.15.

contemporary conclusion about them. Facts are, after all, generally regarded as essential building blocks (amongst other things) of the historian's craft.

In everyday language we often hear 'the fact of the matter is…', or 'the fact remains that the 1820 Settlers arrived in the Albany district in May 1820.' Naïve acceptance of facts that seem indisputable is dangerous. Work published in *Toposcope*[5] reveals historical scholarship of the quest by the authors to find *true* facts, or *new* facts, or to *put the record straight,* or to *fill gaps* in historical knowledge of the Eastern Cape. Twentyman-Jones referred to 'fresh enthusiasm to record lesser known facts'[6] in *Toposcope*. History published in this journal appears to be in true Rankean historical tradition of '*wie es eighentlich gewesen'* (meaning: simply to show how it really was).

Such are commendable considerations for historical research. The historian must get his/her facts right, let alone working with the 'right' (correct) facts, because any account, report, or other piece of historical writing is intended to take effect on someone at some time. This is a necessary condition for the historian but not his/her essential function. Consequently, one can justifiably ask: Are facts taken for granted? What are the implications for historical writing and specific research outcomes if researchers cannot agree on the facts of the matter under discussion and consequently are left with different interpretation/s? The German philosopher and founder member of the Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfurt, Max Horkheimer[7], wrote to his future wife, Rosa Riekher in a letter dated 20 November 1921: 'In reality I have little desire to string together in my memory an enormous number of extraneous ideas, indifferent laws, and lifeless facts.'

All professionals need to master the tools of their trade – it is a technical requirement for researchers to do so. There are so many facts in real life that it is impossible and even unnecessary (let alone unwise) to try and deal with all of them. Facts alone are often not sufficient to ensure desirable research outcomes. Shortcomings aside, the historian remains compelled to draw conclusions based on inferences or whatever other techniques (e.g. interpretation) s/he needs to employ, to arrive at appropriate answers regardless that facts are often incomplete, wrong, distorted, or often too vague. Furthermore, comprehensiveness of facts does not ensure explanatory power in absolute terms. This is intolerable in the scientific environment. Historians cannot arrive at plausible research

[5] The Journal of the Lower Albany Historical Society, South Africa.
[6] Twentyman-Jones, M. 'Chairman's Report 2000', in *Toposcope,* Vol. XXXII, 2001, p.9.
[7] Hokheimer, M. 2007. *A Life in Letters. Selected Correspondence,* pp.21–22.

outcomes if they cannot deal with relevant facts in accordance with an appropriate methodological framework. Fake news, for instance, complicate matters. Consider how important facts are and how debatable research results could be, if we were to ignore that the study object is defined by that group of associated facts and ideas which, when clearly presented in a prescribed amount of space, leave no questions unanswered within the presentation, even though many questions could be asked outside it. Investigative journalism, as an example, play a vital role in this respect.

This paper will progress towards the meta-theoretical level in order to distinguish between 'facts' and 'historical facts.' Why? Our view of society (and therefore of history) will certainly depend on how the historian views the relationship between theory and practice (*praxis*) in his/her profession. Research about facts, are often typically referred to Caesar who crossed the Rubicon. However, the same outcomes can be achieved in our context if we accept the known fact that the British Settlers arrived in the Albany district in 1820. The reality, however, is more complex.

2. Logical positivism and a false sense of the sufficiency of historical facts

Historians became envious of the natural sciences' ability to accurately establish unquestionable facts that were supposedly able to produce exact, predictable results. Popper concluded: 'social sciences do not as yet seem to have found their Galileo'.[8] But, one needs to be careful about such apparent wisdom. Thomas S Kuhn[9], for instance, wrote:

> 'I was struck by the number and extent of the overt disagreements between social scientists about the nature of legitimate scientific problems and methods. Both history and acquaintance made me doubt that practitioners of the natural sciences possess firmer or more permanent answers to such questions than their colleagues in social science.'

[8] Popper, K. *The Poverty of Historicism*, p.1.
[9] Kuhn, TS. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p.(viii).

Horkheimer wrote in this regard as follows:

> 'The positivists of the nineteenth century tried to make and empirical fact out of […] uniformity. They argued that we observe instances of such regularities everywhere, and that we can readily observe that an event in nature that has occurred in a certain way at any given place or time will occur in exactly the same way at any point in time thereafter…'[10]

As one school of historical thought replaces another, idealist interpretations of history swayed before the positivist interpretation, as the former could no longer satisfy the needs of modern historical writing. South African historians K Smith[11], C Saunders[12] and Wright[13] gave valuable insight into the different schools of South African historiography.

Descartes viewed only mathematics as a comprehensive discipline. He arrived at two axioms: the supremacy of reason, and the invariability of laws of nature. In absence of these, history was regarded as unable to make truth claims. Positivism projected methodologies of natural sciences on social sciences. Laws were established and observation became fundamental in making scientific predictions. If historical explanation was to be scientific, then such explanations should have a logical shape.

Hempel opposed the view that history in contradistinction to the physical sciences, is concerned with the description of particular events of the past rather than with the search of general laws that might govern these events. For him (in positivist spirit) general laws have similar functions in history as those found in natural sciences. General laws are indispensable instruments for historical research. They constitute a common basis for similar procedures between natural and historical sciences[14] in scientific undertaking.

By the mid 20th century, logical positivism held: science based on formal logic, universal methodological propositions that were omnipresent, true statements by definition, and, the application of strictly deductive reasoning. Internationally, positivism became a relatively organized political and intellectual movement but would not remain uncriticized for too long. After World War II the historian HAL Fisher disagreed with

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[10] Horkheimer, M. Between Philosophy and Social Science. Selected Writings, pp.315–316.
[11] Smith, K. *The Changing Past. Trends in South African Historical Writing*.
[12] Saunders, C. *The Making of the South African Past. Major Historians on Race and Class.*
[13] Wright, HM. *The Burden of the Past. Liberal-radical Controversy Over Southern African History*.
[14] Hempel, CG. *Aspects of Scientific Explanation and Other Essays in the Philosophy of Science,* p.231.

social scientists who saw in history a plot, a rhythm, a predetermined pattern and stated that in actual life even the most important social problems which press upon a generation are never removed into a laboratory and cannot be solved scientifically. He questioned generalizations and human progress based on linear development.

Today however, positivists are inclined to distance themselves from some of the more self-assured or rigid assertions made by earlier empiricists. Empiricism is merely a tool to discover at best, partial truths. Thus, contemporary positivists reject the once popularized pro-naturalistic program for social sciences. For Dray, this is simply a dangerous model for the philosophy of history. Historians are not primarily concerned with the formulation or the establishing of historical laws.[15] Popper also dealt extensively with the influence of positivism in the context of social and historical sciences.[16] Lastly, Critical Theory's leading contemporary philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, was convinced of 'a theory of society conceived with practical intent.'[17] He explained the application of social philosophy constructed after the model of modern physics for social sciences. Therefore, Critical Theory introduced a new phase about historical facts.

3. Three classic views of historical facts

3.1 Carl Becker's view of historical facts

3.1.1 Becker's first question: what are historical facts?

It appears as if Becker's study on what historical facts are, was the first, most comprehensive, and best known on the subject in the first half of the 20th century. Becker explained that superficially viewed, everyone seems to be familiar with the word 'history' as it simply refers to the 'past.' He claimed: when one uses the word 'facts', everyone appears to understand what they mean - facts give some form of stability to those who employ them, historians seemingly feel safe when they deal with facts, or one often tends to speak of 'hard facts' or 'cold facts'. However, they do provide a solid foundation for (future) historical narratives.[18]

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[15] Dray, W. *Laws and Explanation in History,* pp.1-2.
[16] Popper, K. *The Logic of Scientific Discovery.*
[17] Habermas, J. *Theory and Practice,* p.1.
[18] Becker, CL. "What are Historical Facts?" in Meyerhoff, H. (ed.). *The Philosophy of History in our Time. An anthology,* p.120.

Historical facts seem to be solid, something substantial like physical matter, and they appear to have a specific shape and clear outline – like a brick. If the historian is not careful continued Becker, he would stumble over them, conducts his business by digging them out and then stack them up either for himself or someone else to use in some 'structural enterprise'.

Becker answered three principle questions: *what* are historical facts? *where* are historical facts? and *when* are historical facts? He wanted to determine if historical facts are really as 'hard' and 'stable' as they were supposed to be and used the event of Caesar who crossed the Rubicon as an example of a simple, common fact. He characterised this fact as having a clear and persistent outline. The reality about Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon is that this event was accompanied by other acts, words and thoughts of many other men. In other words, the crossing of the Rubicon involved thousands of other "lesser facts" and therefore, this original single simple fact can no longer be treated as simple (uncomplicated) at all. Realistically, we deal with a simplistic *generalization* of a combination of thousands of other facts.

Becker then observed: by *itself,* it means nothing to us that Caesar crossed the Rubicon. Although it might be a fact with a clear outline, there are 'stings' attached to them. These 'strings' are the reality that they are connected to many other facts. Such a fact only means something when it losses its originally incorrectly perceived 'clear outline' status. The meaning of any fact cannot take place until and unless it is incorporated into the complex circumstances that brought them into being. This complexity of circumstances is charcterised by a series of events that grew from other relations that pertain to the original fact.

Our originally stated position changed for a few reasons. The initially stated simple fact is not as 'hard' or 'cold' or something with a clear outline (material) with measurable dimensions as initially perceived. Instead, we are dealing with a *symbol* or simple *statement* that is, in turn, only a *generalization* of a thousand simpler other facts. A generalization *alone* cannot be used in isolation, and the more simplistic a historical fact is, the clearer and more provable it seems to be. Paradoxically, simplistic facts become less useful *in,* and *for* itself. This becomes more intricate when we deal with facts about e.g. human imagination – those that are considered to be mainly myths that correspond to no reality at all.

Becker concluded about a historical fact: it is any act, event, emotion or idea. The problem is that the historian cannot deal *directly* with any of those, since they have already

disappeared. Consequently, s/he can only deal directly with a statement about the past event. This statement is an affirmation that the event actually occurred at some time in the past. The result is that in reality, the historian never deals with 'cold', 'hard', 'brute' facts, but only with an affirmation about such – be they true or false. Becker then made a clear distinction between the short-lived *event* that took place at some point in time, and the statement about such past event. Historians deal with *affirmations* about historical facts and they are in themselves not the actual past event, but merely a symbol that enables us to recreate this past event, imaginatively. The surest thing we can say about symbols is that they are more or less appropriate.

3.1.2 Becker's second question: where are historical facts?

Arguably, 'dead' and 'dry' historical facts are found in documents piled up somewhere in archives, letters, diaries, newspaper reports, private research notes or other forms of written formats, e.g. computer hard drives or small portable memory sticks. Again, Becker placed this conventional wisdom under scrutiny.

Facts are in someone's mind, or nowhere else. He quotes Abraham Lincoln's assassination as an example of an historical event, and since it has taken place some time ago, never to be repeated again – it *was* a historical event, but it *is* now, a historical fact in someone's mind. The interesting situation about facts, is that they do not exist in any documented format – they are only statements about a past event that exists in e.g. documents, etc., as a result of someone who had in his/her mind an image of that particular past event. This human intervention or 're-creation' of historical facts makes the 'dead' facts to come alive. It is only then that they become capable of making a difference in (to) the world. The fact remains: the actual event has gone forever and can never be repeated again. The past event can only make a difference to (in) the world once it has entered the mind of someone. Our question is: how does the historian deal with the past? Becker's answer: 'the historian deals with the external world through records.'[19]

3.1.3 Becker's last question: when are historical facts?

[19] *Ibid.,* p.131.

An acceptable answer to this question is close to the concept ‘time’. Becker acknowledges the elusiveness of time as an indefinable moment. If the historical fact is present, and if it exists now, imaginatively, in the mind of the historian, then it must be part of the present. Almost immediately, the present and the ‘now’ fact disappeared into the past. We can think of the world of history in terms of historical facts as past events that exists imaginatively, now, in the mind of the historian.

From the relationship between past events and historical facts, Becker developed five implications: first is the impossibility for historians to present even the simplest of actual events in its entirety. 19th Century ‘scientific historians’ thought they could do this by presenting only the objective facts that allegedly speak for themselves. Soon Becker (and scholars after him) conceded that even the simplest fact such as ‘Caesar crossed the Rubicon’ could not be a definitive representation of all the facts about his crossing of the Rubicon. It is at best a choice made by historians between different affirmations about the crossing of the Rubicon that were available to the historian at the time. This reality, *viz.* that the past event (is not an historical fact) and because facts cannot speak for themselves and cannot impose any meaning, but only do so when the historian speaks and imposes a meaning for them, gave rise to Becker’s second implication.

The historian cannot eliminate his personal presence from historical facts. This is true for all scientific work because of the intimate relationship that exists between scientists and human needs and purposes. The involvement of historical persona implies that the meaning and significance of historical facts cannot easily be agreed upon. This is for two reasons: the constant re-creation of the facts, and their incompleteness resulting in the continuous rewriting of history. The situation is further complicated by the already vanished events that are differently imagined in subsequent generations. The differently imagined pictures of actual events are determined by two factors: the actual event itself, and our own (personal or collective) present purposes, desires and prejudices. We need to understand the historian before we can understand his writings and the dialectical relationship that exits between the present influences on the past and in turn, past influences on the present.

Thirdly, Becker explained that no one could profit from historical research unless one does some for oneself. However once done, and as a result of the views above, historical research outcomes differ.

Fourthly, every person knows at least some history - enough for immediate everyday purposes. The incompleteness of historical facts, how much and how accurate our knowledge about history is, depends on their purposes in the larger world.

Finally, the kind of history that has most influence on the life of the community and the course of events is that history that everyday people carry around in their minds. We all have a picture of the past in some form or another. Regardless of how little this perception corresponds to the real past, it assists and determines our ideas about, e.g. politics and society.

We summarize Becker's views: a historical fact is only a *statement* about a particular past event because the event itself is no longer directly accessible. It is in the past. The historian can only deal directly with a statement about the past event. The historical fact is not an event in itself, but a linguistic construct that makes it possible to bring to mind an image of the past event, and it is incorrect to treat facts as 'hard', etc. Since facts are merely symbols, they can at best only be regarded as appropriate symbols.

3.2 E.H. Carr's view of historical facts

3.2.1 Carr's representation of the commonsense view of history

There is no indication that Carr was at the time of conducting his research, familiar with Becker's work published some years prior to his that was published by Meyerhoff. Surprisingly, we find noticeable similarities and differences between the two. Naturally, one tends to make some comparisons between their views about historical facts.

Becker's research question was: 'What are historical facts?' whilst Carr's asked: 'What is history?' Carr nevertheless allocated an entire first chapter that deals with the relationship between historian and his facts. Becker and Carr's approaches and structures of presentation differed. Becker worked with three specific questions, whereas Carr on the other hand, did not.

Carr's outline of the commonsense view of history resembles that of Becker's in that the 19th century was the age of documents and premium placed on facts. Ranke protested against moralizing history and that scientific history, instead, (in positivist tradition) was based on the collection of facts with conclusions drawn independently from them. After the collection and interpretation of facts, they are 'served' up by the historian in a style that appeals to him. In line with the British empirical tradition of the supposed separation

between subject and object, facts are based on the sense-impressions that impinged from the outside on the historians' consciousness. Apparently, the related process of reception was held to be positive, and once having received the data, then the historian acts on such facts. This would not suffice.[20]

3.2.2 Carr's distinction between different 'orders' of facts

Before attention is paid to Carr's distinction between the different 'order' of facts, reference needs to be made to his views about the complexity of history. No 'ultimate' history is achievable in any generation because the making and writing of history is superseded by, and in, subsequent generations. Sceptics argue that because of the involvement of people and their different views of the past, that no objective history is possible. For instance, views of society change, and such views reflect our own contemporary position in time.

Carr also used the fact that Caesar crossed the Rubicon to explain his view about the 'order' of facts. This fact is not of comparable order to the fact that e.g. there is a table in the room. This is despite the fact that they both have the same objective character in relation to the person. Therefore, there exists a different order of facts because not all past facts are historical facts. This requires some kind of appropriate criteria that distinguishes facts of history, from facts about the past.

According to the commonsense view of history, there are certain basic facts that are the same for all historians, e.g. the Battle of Hastings of 1016. From this, Carr formulated two sets of observations. The first is that so-called basic facts are the same for all and that they belong to the 'raw' materials of historians. Although these facts must be correct, they are not the historian's primary concern. Their correctness is a necessary condition, but not his/her essential function.

Carr's second observation focuses mainly on the selection of facts. According to him, it used to be said that facts speak for themselves – but this is not so. It is the historian who decides on them, and in what order and context, they are presented. In order to do so, the historian is necessarily selective and consequently decides on the relative importance of different facts. It is therefore logic that the necessity to decide between the basic facts,

[20] Carr, EH. *What is History?* pp.8–10.

rests not on the quality of the facts, but on an *a priori* decision applied by the historian. Clearly, the selection and presentation of facts influence our opinion and research results.

3.2.3 The process by which a fact becomes a fact of history

Not all facts are facts of history. According to Carr, a fact needs a secondor and sponsor in the sense that if someone else does not take it up in the literature, it will remain obscure and become an unhistorical fact. The status of a historical fact and its thesis or interpretation depends on whether it is supported or accepted by other historians as valid and significant.

This is problematic. So-called facts held in esteem by 'authorities' or in 'authoritative' books, are actually incomplete because of the problems surrounding their selection and interpretation. Per definition, interpretation generally contains realities such as conscious or unconscious pre-selection, pre-determination and whether others believe in them. Despite the unavailability of all the facts, history still remains strictly speaking based on them. The contradiction is: history is not factual at all, but at best 'a series of accepted judgements'.[21]

In the above, the role of the historian remains pivotal. The dual function is to discover the few significant facts and turn them into facts of history – discarding those many other insignificant facts as unhistorical. On the one hand, the historian might be faced with too many documents and facts but on the other, he needs to guard against dry-as-dust factual history. The dilemma remains that neither will all the facts nor will all the documents ever be available. Nor can any document tell more than what the author thought, what he thought ought to have happened or would happen, or what s/he wanted others to think s/he thought, or even what s/he himself thought s/he thought. Carr continued that nothing means anything until and unless the historian makes use and sense of them. What happened in the past is a reconstruction in the mind of the historian because no document constitutes history. Documents do not provide ready-made information. All history then, is the history of thought, based on a selection and interpretation/s of facts that becomes interpretations of interpretations.

Carr's concluding views on neglected truths about facts were that there could be no such concept as "pure" facts. They come to us in a refracted form through the mind of the

[21] *Ibid.,* pp.13–14.

historian. The historian gets the facts s/he wants as a result of his/her interpretation. There is a fine line between understanding and sympathy and the contact with the mind of those about whom s/he is writing. The past is necessarily viewed through the eyes of the present because writing takes place in the present.

Finally, the process through which a fact becomes a fact of history is closely linked to the relationship between historian and his/her facts. Carr outlined this view as follows: the historian must respect and bring into consideration all the known or knowable relevant facts and ensure that they are accurate. The historian needs to guard against propaganda, historical fiction and over-interpretation. The historian starts with provisional selection and interpretation of facts. Whereas Carr's argument ends with the interpretation of historical facts, such, by contrast, is the starting point for Schaff.

3.3 A. Schaff's view of historical facts

3.3.1 Introduction

Schaff benefited from Becker and Carr's earlier research. In fact, Becker's earlier work formed the basis for Schaff's analysis of what historical facts are. It is therefore logic that in treating Schaff's contribution, comparisons between Becker and Carr are appropriate. Not surprisingly, in Schaff's work are numerous concepts that were already deployed by his predecessors. However, the two aspects that distinguish Schaff from them are his new semantics, and his materialist conception of historical facts as opposed to idealist interpretations held by Becker and Carr respectively.

The material differences between Schaff and Becker's respective presentations, can be summarized as follows: whereas Becker's analysis was based on the *what, where* and *when* of historical facts, Schaff formulated his classification as follows: the presentation of various historical phenomena that may be called historical facts; how to distinguish between all the manifestations of social life and others not qualifying for the term historical fact; the structure of historical facts; is a historical fact an event in the past or is it a statement about history?, lastly, what is the gnoseological status of a historical fact?[22]

For Schaff, the different views amongst historians about facts take effect the moment when they start to interpret them. This is so despite the fact that they might have been

[22] Schaff, A. *Truth and History*, pp.170–185.

working with the same facts, or have similar knowledge, and have employed the same research techniques. As Becker, Schaff rejects the Rankean view of historical writing; agreed that the conceptual apparatus of physics is cognitively flawed and that, seemingly, because we cannot arrive at objective truths, that such then needs to be falsified. In essence: Schaff's crude view of a historical fact is similar to Becker's and he ends his overview of this introductory section, that historical facts are just as ambiguous as e.g. the category, 'freedom'.

3.3.2 Schaff and what is an historical fact?

This question does not only pertain to social sciences. French conventionalists questioned the so-called 'independence' and 'sovereignty' of historical facts, as well as the conviction about the alleged existence of 'raw facts'.

Schaff provisionally defined historical facts as some event that has taken place in the past (a fact). He listed the following manifestations that may be regarded (but does not have to be) as historical facts: a single event; certain processess; certain institutions; materialized products of certain events and processess; material culture goods; and lastly, diverse elements as aspects of history. From the above, two further issues need comment. First: the scale of the possible designates of the term 'historical facts' is very rich and varied. Not all manifestations of our social life automatically belong to the category historical fact. Second: the specific difference between what is, and what is not a historical fact, needs to be found in the unique context (or system of reference) that transforms a usual thing or event into a historical fact.

Schaff then attends to a second aspect as to what a historical fact is. This has to do with how to distinguish between the many manifestations of social life that can be named historical facts, as opposed to those that are historically insignificant and therefore cannot be named historical facts. In other words: when does the possibility become a reality for a manifestation in life to become a historical fact? Schaff's answer is: it is the event's *context* that is essential, its connection with other events both in terms of their causes and results. Those events with no significant implications are discarded. With reference to context, Schaff brought up three characteristics, *viz.* a certain (specific) context, a connection with a certain (unique) totality, and a certain system of reference. These are important issues because the same event might in different interpretations not bring about the same

historical significance. Schaff made it clear that when transformed in proper condition, they *may* become historical facts but is not always the case.

At this point Schaff gives what can be viewed as a new and expanded definition of the concept historical fact and wrote that historical facts are those manifestations of the life of individuals and society which have been selected from among many others, belonging to the same category, because of their cause and effect connections and interactions within the framework of larger totalities. It is the *significance* of a given event, process or of their products, which constitutes their criteria for selection. This selection takes place in a certain system of reference through active subjective anthropological human cognition. This system of reference implies, *inter alia* that historical facts are operative in a social context. When taken together to form a whole, then they are true in the realm of collective consciousness – they impact op public opinion and public opinion impacts on them. Taken in isolation (individually), historical facts mean nothing and are false.

A third aspect of historical facts has to do with their structure. Previously, the superficial view that historical facts 'speak for themselves' was dismissed. The structural reality of the so-called 'simplicity' or 'complexity' or 'partial' or 'completeness' of historical facts is likely to follow the same path. It was argued that the fact that Caesar crossed the Rubicon is made up by thousands of other facts. Consequently, there can be no longer such concept as a 'simple' fact with no strings attached to it. Their apparent simplicity is an illusion and is simply caused by the out of context simplicity of the statement made by the historian about the event. As such, this simple statement is at best only a generalization of a complex concrete reality. The shape of an historical fact, therefore, is an abstraction, and the blame about its apparent simplicity, rests with the historian and the simple typology and theory employed by him/her - not with the fact. Therefore, explanatory models that negate the complexity of historical facts are erroneous, because it is *us* who are interested in, and responsible for, simplifying the complex reality into simple facts. The real problem seems to be one of distinguishing between facts as *'res gestae'* (of the things that happened) or as statements about history, that is, some element of *'historiae rerum gestarum'*.[23] This leads to Schaff's next of the question what a historical fact is.

Schaff's fourth version commences with a critique of Becker's view that historians apparently deal directly with statements about the past. For Schaff, this is incorrect, since

[23] *Ibid.,* p.177.

'we are always dealing with processes extended in time, this pertains to the *entirety* of our cognition' and serves as an example of *'subjective idealism'*. In other words, this problem is related to our dilemma of the 'objectivity of cognition'. Since, according to Schaff 'we do not perceive or come to know anything *directly'*, we can only talk about an 'observational impression'. He also dismisses the idealist concept about the truth or falseness of historical facts on the basis that such pertains only to *judgements* about reality, and not reality itself.

Schaff introduced an opposing view to Becker's with regards to the ontological status of an historical fact. This view is that of W. Moszczeńska. She made a clear distinction between a fact in history and a historical fact. The differences are: a fact in history (e.g. there was a table in the room) is a particle of historical reality that constitutes a relatively isolated system as a fact that really occurred at some time. A historical fact, however, is an object of study. A historical fact must also be understood as a particle of this reality separated by the mind through isolating it from a larger totality from which it was, in fact, impossible to isolate. In this way 'the historical fact…. is a correspondent of the fact in history but a correspondent which is distorted to a certain degree'[24] by the historian. They are facts that are known in, or will eventually become known to, science.

There is at least one consideration that needs attention. If every past event in history is raised to the order of a historical fact simply because they have left a trace, then it becomes nonsensical in the sense that it is not possible to speak about 'facts' that have not left a trace and thus do not exist since they have not left a trace. Consequently, if we want to maintain Moszczeńska's distinction between facts in history and historical facts, the latter needs to be called something different and their specific criteria, be investigated from scratch because something that did not leave a trace, could not have existed. Schaff solved this problem by proposing that instead of upholding the distinction between facts in history and historical facts, the dual aspects of one and the same fact should be analysed by the historian in terms of 'its objective cause and effect links with the historical process, as appropriately qualified by the historian'.[25]

Schaff's fifth (and last) version of what an historical fact is pertains to the problem that is linked to the structure (simple/complex, etc.) of facts, but more specifically, to the gnoseological and ontological status, respectively.

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[24] *Ibid.*
[25] *Ibid.,* p.185.

In the gnoseological sense, it is asked if the historical fact is really 'raw', with no subjective anthropological influences associated with it. Here the human mind did not contribute anything to their existence and taken by itself, it is without of any meaning – merely existing as a 'thing in' itself. However, in the ontological sense, an historical fact is the result of human interventive action of some kind of the active role of language, definition, and definite theory. The ontological status demands that and event, and objective element of the past, which is selected from the infinite many other connecting facts becomes a scientific fact within in the framework of a given system of reference. In this sense a historical fact comprises of both ontological and gnoseological components because the historian selects on the basis 'of its appropriate components, the delineation of its temporal, geographical and material limits, up to its interpretation, the cognizing subject constantly interferes, as do its manifold conditionings and, above all, the theory on whose basis this operation takes place'.[26]

The selection and interpretation of facts did not take place arbitrarily because their connections and mutual interconnections exist objectively. They are neither the creation nor the invention of the historian. This takes place on the basis of a predetermined theory and will result in different research outcomes. Carr's claims that facts do not come to us in a 'pure' format, supports this standpoint. Blake states that he begins with an interpretation that he interprets, and Marrou states that the beginning of the process commences with a 'posed question'.

Finally, it remains to make a few provisional and cryptic comments about the question of the selection of historical facts. In a sense, selection is a gnoseological issue as a human act and is linked to the question of the material that make up an historical fact. Dialectically speaking, this takes place in accordance with a theory or hypothesis and influences of the ontological status of facts. The influencing factors on selection can be summarized as human interpretation, their connections, and manifold dependence and interactions with other facts. Their anticipated role in society, the anthropological acts of self-will, pure subjectivism and individual arbitrariness, and the fact that the historian is self a social product of the theory employed and lastly, the prevailing interests of the historian's epoch. At the time when AJP Taylor wrote his history of the English, he commented that one could complain that too much evidence has been preserved[27] to work through. Of all the

[26] *Ibid.*, p.187.
[27] Taylor, AJP. *English History 1914–1945*, p.729.

facts originally started with, only a fraction will remain – 'much passes away into oblivion', some of it as a result of human fallibility.

4. Conclusion

From time immemorial humans struggled to improve their lot – approaches and desired outcomes in search of a better life, however, changed. Such is also true for the first Settlers and all historians regarding the Lower Albany.

The search for new perspectives[28] by historians remains work in progress. At the same time, the conservation and preservation needs of the past remain important aspects of social *praxis*, in particular, for historians. Although an attempt was made to stay clear from a philosophical debate, historical writing and philosophy remain too closely related to ignore each other. Philosophers are greatly involved in the philosophy of history. The point was further made that 'it is precisely philosophy which is primarily responsible for the historians' theoretical muddleheadedness'.[29] In a sense, philosophy has to do with the future of mankind and history with the past. There are, however, problems related to this uncomplicated view. The critico-practical activities of the relationship between critical social theory and practice place new demands on the future role of historical research and this in turn, determines how historians will deal with historical facts. Previously, Horkheimer wrote:

'in real society, human beings are dominated by other human beings; what was needed was to impart knowledge, on the basis of observations and of a systematic study of facts, as to how one achieves domination and how one maintains it.'[30]

The concept fact is varied – it is too broad, too narrow or not so 'clear' as is often perceived. It is difficult to uphold such concept because its every-day use gives rise to semantic confusion. This confusion has its origin in the superficial distinction between fact and theory. This is intolerable in empirical research.

The real complexity of a historical fact leads to the rejection of the simplistic concept of historical facts. This is because of the infinite things that can be termed historical fact

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[28] Webb, A. 'Why was England First? Some Thoughts on the Concepts of an Industrial Revolution', in *Toposcope,* Vol. XXXII, 2001, p.22.

[29] Schaff, A. *op. cit.,* p.47.

[30] Horkheimer, M. 1993. *Between Philosophy and Social Science. Selected Early Writings*. (Translated by GF Hunter, MS Kramer, and J Torpey. Introduction by GF Hunter.) The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England.

and the (un-)realistic availability of them. Even if they are available, modern cognitive theory makes it difficult to accept that we can deal directly with facts. Fortunately, cognitive theory is both creative and restrictive in its relation to historical facts. The intricacies surrounding the structure of historical facts, confirms this.

Just because outdated views are replaced by new paradigms, do not make them in principle unscientific. The same can be said of historical facts. It appears as if statements should replace historical facts. The reality that we cannot escape, is the limitation of the psychological considerations brought up when words are used. It is within such boundaries that we need to employ grammatically significant words into sentences to express a statement. These statements are the fundamentals for arguments. Combined arguments constitute a particular view on something and opinions that govern the world.

The future world and historical profession have been debated for millennia from different perspectives. They relate to the relationship between theory and practice of the historian – the philosophy of *praxis*, essentially. Toynbee, for instance, wrote that historians 'generally illustrate rather than correct the ideas of the communities within they live and work'.[31] Popper however, refers to the 'political hopes and utopian dreams of future society' despite the difficulties involved in applying renewed moral enthusiasm in a complex society. The practical irrelevance of certain facts and the reflection of the historian and the influence of his cultural setting, are simply burdens of the profession.

Aspects of above are futuristic. The philosophy of *praxis* seeks human emancipation (future) from forces and conditions (current) that enslave mankind. In this, critical theory of the social sciences, including historical sciences, combines philosophy and social sciences. It is both descriptive and normative on three levels: it must be explanatory, practical and normative, all at the same time. For our purposes, we have seen that history fulfils the explanatory function based on facts, statements, etc. Secondly, historians have a role to play as change agents towards a better society. Saunders's view here is clear: 'historical writing in South Africa has had a political purpose' and professional historians has a role to play in shaping the South African future society.[32] Normative boundaries will demarcate the achievable practical goals. Social theory with practical intent is a tool for transforming capitalist society into a more democratic state.

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[31] Toynbee, AJ. *A Study of History*, p.1.
[32] Saunders, C. *The Making of the South African Past. Major Historians on Race and Class*, pp.193, 195.

Traditional proponents advocated for future sciences and new society to be reached though rational endeavours. Instead, argues Maxwell, what is required is a new *philosophy of wisdom*. This requirement is as a result of our actions, or lack thereof. It involves the radical change in the fundamental *aims* and *methods* of inquiry. Primarily new knowledge needs to be replaced by *acts in new appropriate ways*. The ultimate goal is to overcome the fundamentally damaging effects of rationality inherent in the philosophy of knowledge[33] that is based on a dogmatic view of historical facts.

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[33] Maxwell, N. *From Knowledge to Wisdom. A Revolution in the Aims and Methods of Science,* pp.(v), 2; 65.

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